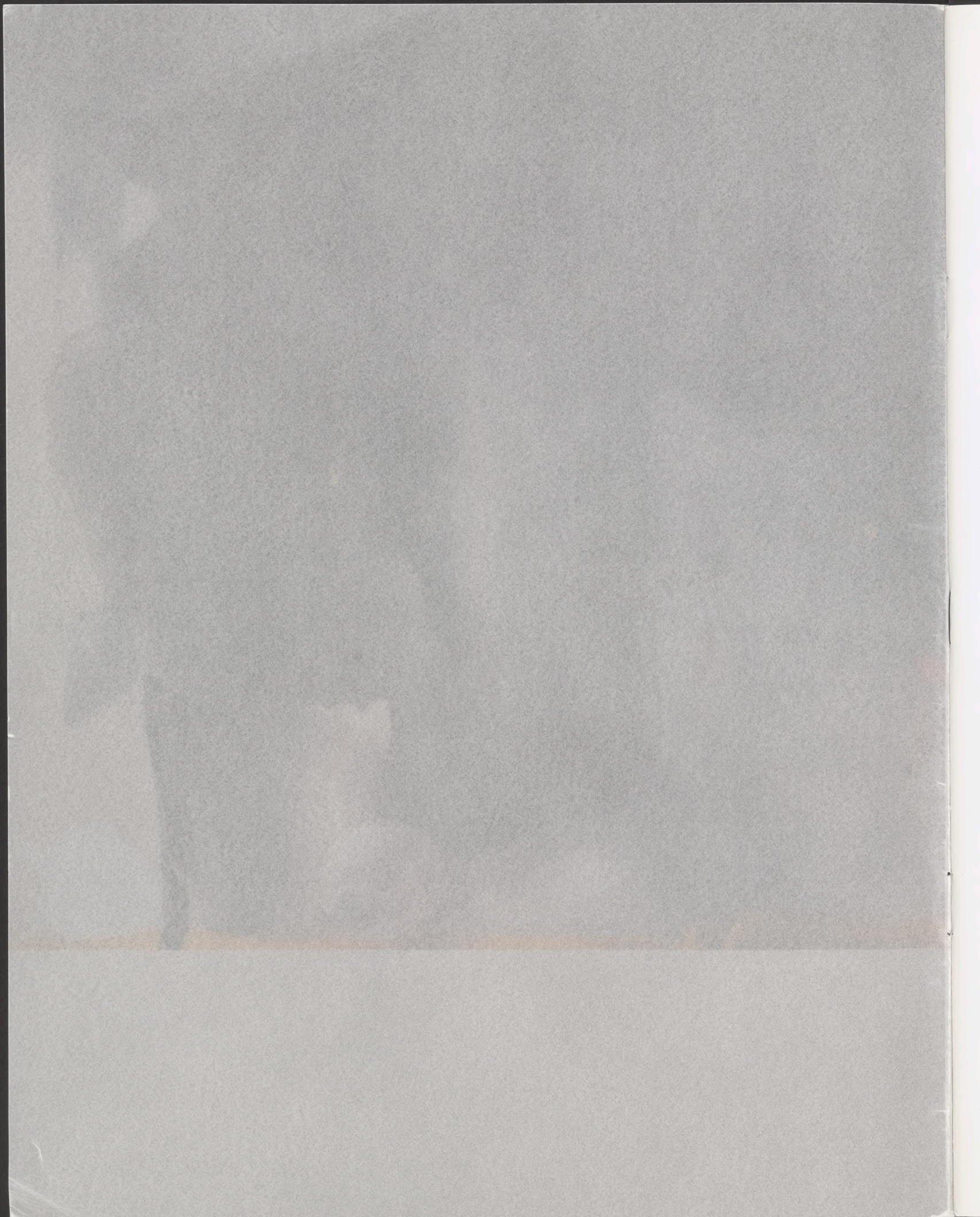




Robert Rauschenberg










# Frankenthaler

*The Darker Palette*



Cover: *Casanova*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 5'-11" x 11'-8 1/2", collection of Lois and Georges de Menil

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Frankenthaler: The Darker Palette*

Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, GA.  
April 16–June 7, 1998

The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
July 1–September 17, 1998

The Art Museum, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.  
January 10–February 28, 1999



Savannah College  
of Art and Design

**Exhibit A Gallery**

April 16–June 7, 1998

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Frankenthaler

*The Darker Palette*



#### Author's Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to many people who helped to make this exhibition a reality. My thanks to Ann Freedman and Marella Consolini of Knoedler & Company, New York, for introducing me to the ambitious programs of the Savannah College of Art and Design, and to Dr. Judith Van Baron, the vice president for external affairs at the college, for her enthusiasm for the project. I am grateful, also, for the support and assistance of Dr. Suzanne Gandell, SCAD director of galleries, and for the helpful advice provided by Meredith Long, Meredith Long Gallery, Houston, and Mary Joan Waid, André Emmerich Gallery, New York. Maureen St. Onge's tireless efforts, special expertise, and thoughtful suggestions were, as usual, invaluable and greatly appreciated. Finally, my profound thanks to the lenders to this exhibition for sharing their carefully chosen paintings with a larger audience and, of course, to Helen Frankenthaler for her friendship and for making our most recent joint venture as stimulating, provocative, and challenging as the first.

**Karen Wilkin**

New York

February 1998





Figure 1. *Mountains and Sea*, 1952, oil on canvas, 7'-16 1/8" x 9'-9 1/4", private collection

## I. Frankenthaler: *The Darker Palette*

Over the dark mountain, over the dark pinewood  
Down the long dark valley along the shrunken river,  
Returns the splendor without rays, the shining shadow,  
Peace-bringer, the matrix of all shining and quieter of shining.

—from Robinson Jeffers, *Night*

Helen Frankenthaler's name has been synonymous with radiant, harmoniously orchestrated color since the 1950s, when she first declared herself as a painter to be reckoned with—to informed eyes, then, and to an increasingly wide public, ever since—with the now legendary picture *Mountains and Sea* (fig. 1). Painted in 1952, when its precocious author was twenty-three, this luminous image is regarded today as the Urtext of stain painting, a decisive influence on the development of the Color Field abstraction of the 1960s. The picture's looping lines and floating shapes, its clear pools of rose, blue,

and green seem to magically transform the luminosity, fluidity, and intimacy of watercolor into the intensity and ambitious scale of oil on canvas, without sacrificing either transparency or spontaneity. *Mountains and Sea* announced the presence of both a distinctive new voice and a new painting syntax; its disembodied stains issued a challenge to the dragged paint handling and loaded surfaces that had been synonymous with serious abstraction of the period.

Frankenthaler's own responses to her "breakthrough" picture—her paintings of the 1950s—established her ability to construct poetic abstract images of astonishing immediacy and directness and to create ambiguous, suggestive spaces with floods of glowing hues. These works still form the bedrock of her present formidable international reputation.

But in the four decades that have passed since Frankenthaler painted *Mountains and Sea*, she has, not surprisingly, expanded and deepened her field of inquiry, creating an



impressive body of work in many media that explores a wide range of moods and formal strategies. Yet even today, her pictures are often discussed in the same terms as her earliest efforts—with emphasis on her gifts as a colorist and the importance of color to her art.<sup>1</sup> Her commentators refer to her aesthetic kinship with Henri Matisse and Claude Monet and to her assimilation of Hans Hofmann's ideas about construction with color; they speculate about the importance of Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb's thinly painted, chromatically complex Abstract Expressionist paintings as precedents and anatomize the relation of Frankenthaler's work to the color-based abstraction of such colleagues as Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, and Jules Olitski.

Such connections are, of course, real. Just how much Frankenthaler learned from Matisse—especially from the Matisse of rapidly brushed, thin "esquisse-like" paintings—is manifest in her evident understanding of how color functions, structurally and expressively, among other things. It does not diminish Frankenthaler's originality to note, as well, that Matisse's example informs her elegant drawing with the edges of color areas and, most subtly, her elusive images, which seem to pit perception against memory against imagination, and then subjugate them all to the imperatives of abstractness and the demands of the picture itself. Just how much sympathy Frankenthaler has for Monet—especially for the Monet of unstable, diaphanous water surfaces and cloud reflections—can be seen most clearly in her melting abstractions of the 1970s and '80s, both in their close-valued, translucent hues and their tenuous suggestions of landscape space and light. Just how much Frankenthaler learned, early in her evolution, from Hofmann—among others—is visible in her ability to create space and, at the same time, assert flatness, by varying the amount and density of zones of color.

If Frankenthaler's debt to these older masters is easy to track, her relation to the colorists of her own generation is more complicated, no matter how direct and well-documented the links between them. The story of the young Noland and Louis' visit to the New York studio of the even younger Frankenthaler is familiar to anyone interested in recent American art. Seeing *Mountains and Sea* on that trip acted as a catalyst for the development of both artists' individual brands of color-based abstraction, and Frankenthaler, in turn, was later affected by their work. But while she admires and, as she says, "honors" their art, she has never thought of

herself as a Color Field painter. Her convictions remain rooted in the Abstract Expressionism that helped to shape her aesthetic in the 1950s, when, newly graduated from Bennington College, she was plunged into New York's vanguard art world. Through her friendship with Clement Greenberg, Frankenthaler came to know most of the original Abstract Expressionist generation, perhaps most significantly Adolph Gottlieb, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko, most of them at least twenty years older than she was, but with whom, she has said, she felt herself to be "a painter among painters."<sup>2</sup>

As Frankenthaler has frequently acknowledged, her intimate exposure to the work of these innovative artists, her visits to their studios and exhibitions, often in the company of Greenberg—their most articulate and perceptive critic—was immeasurably important to her own formation. Her early work reveals how profoundly she was affected by her admission into this select circle and—what is more impressive—how fearlessly she explored what stimulated her in their art. More important, it is plain that throughout her development, Frankenthaler has continued to share many of Abstract Expressionism's fundamental assumptions about what painting can be, both formally and conceptually. Like her adventurous predecessors among the New York School, she subscribes to aesthetic beliefs that derive ultimately from Surrealist theory and psychoanalytic thought, with an admixture of Existential angst. Her approach is posited on the notion (among other things) that the source of art is the unconscious, that the painter must rely principally on intuition, and that a painting is the visible manifestation of the artist's most deeply held, perhaps inchoate beliefs and emotions.

Such assumptions help to separate Frankenthaler from her real contemporaries, the Color Field painters with whom she is frequently linked. Noland, Louis, and Olitski are chronologically closer to Frankenthaler than any of the Abstract Expressionists—all three are, in fact, older than she is, although she began exhibiting considerably earlier—but their art, or at least the art on which their reputations rest, seems to depart from a set of givens entirely different from hers. The passionate inwardness of Frankenthaler's painting helps to distinguish it from that of her colleagues. For all its sensuous beauty and for all its reliance on intuition, the work of Louis, Noland, and Olitski seems cooler (in the Marshall McLuhan sense) and more conceptualized than



Frankenthaler's. All three Color Field painters devised highly individual, simplified, serial formats—Noland's *Circles* and *Chevrons*, for example, or Louis's *Veils* and empty-centered *Unfurleds*—"signature" layouts that allowed them to concentrate not on inventing pictorial structures but on orchestrating complex, subtle color relationships.

Frankenthaler, by contrast, has never worked in series; family resemblances sometimes exist among groups of pictures, evidence of recurring preoccupations or of what she calls "worrying an idea until I have exhausted it."<sup>3</sup> And while her color is no less complex or subtle than that of her colleagues, it is always inextricably bound up with unpremeditated drawing, rather than being disposed on a predetermined layout (however flexible or supple that layout might be). Frankenthaler may start a picture by playing with an apparently simple compositional idea—loading one side of the painting and leaving the other empty, or restricting herself to three colors—but these are merely generating devices, not ends in themselves. Her paintings may flirt with notions of symmetry and asymmetry, with repetition and variation, but her images, however abstract, are always improvised or discovered.

There are other salient differences, as well. For all her commitment to abstraction, Frankenthaler often flirts with reference; her fluid pictorial language depends on forms and spaces that evoke our experience of the natural world. Yet these references seem not so much intended as recognized, as though feeling (or memory) had determined the way paint flowed without the painter's conscious direction. At times, it seems as though Frankenthaler watched the seed of an image evolve without deliberately willing it and then allowed the reference to become, momentarily, more explicit. Far from asserting the fact of flatness or being deduced from the dimensions or proportions of the canvas, as even the most suggestive Color Field pictures seem to be, Frankenthaler's images are ambiguous revelations of interior states, "abstract responses to something seen or experienced or felt," as she puts it, not dispassionately conceived structures (however ravishing to the eye) that probe the character of the painting as object.

Frankenthaler has always insisted, too, that she attaches as much importance to drawing as to color in her work. She regards the two elements as inextricable from one another and sees both as inseparable from the creation of her personal conception of pictorial space. "I mix or use or 'discover'

a color," Frankenthaler has said. "It can be a radiant blue or mud from the bottom of the pail—and I put it down and take it from there into an ordered, drawn space. It is not merely the relationship of color alone; color alone, for itself alone, is often mere decoration."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this is a legacy of her grounding in Cubism, through an early art training—well before her brief stay at Hofmann's Provincetown school—that involved both the interrogation of Cubist works and the meticulous translation of perceptions into carefully adjusted compositions of monochrome planes. Frankenthaler recently noted that in her formative years she was far more engaged by "the frontal character and the depth of Picasso's and Braque's drawing,"<sup>5</sup> and by the fluctuating, unstable space of their paintings than by their use of color. "For me, as a picture develops," Frankenthaler has said, "color always comes out of drawing. I never start out only with color. I start out as a spacemaker on a flat thing with four corners. But color is the first message on the picture plane. From there it takes its place as scale and drawing."<sup>6</sup>

In the late 1940s, when Frankenthaler was a student, and in the early 1950s, when, as she describes it, she "was formed and was forming" her own "signature,"<sup>7</sup> the artists who interested her most included Wassily Kandinsky (in his pre-geometric phase), Joan Miró, Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock—a diverse group loosely linked by their commitment to abstraction, their belief in the expressiveness of the materials of painting, and, with the exception of Pollock, their use of mysterious, biomorphic images. They are not, however, artists primarily noted for their investigations of color.

This not to underestimate Miró or Gorky (in particular) as colorists; it is simply a question of what Frankenthaler says concerned her at the time. In general, in her formative years, she seems to have responded most strongly to reconsiderations of pictorial space and explorations of the possibilities of line, not simply as boundary or definer of shape and form but as an independent expressive element in its own right. She looked hard, for example, at de Kooning's most powerful efforts of the 1940s, essentially black and white pictures that depended for much of their impact on tense, calligraphic drawing. Similarly, the Pollocks that impressed Frankenthaler most were the fluid near-monochromes of his 1950 and 1951 exhibitions at Betty Parsons Gallery,<sup>8</sup> while it was Gorky's drawings, rather than his canvases, that most deeply engaged her. "I came to the great colorists, Matisse and Monet, much



later,"<sup>9</sup> Frankenthaler notes. At the time, she says, "Picasso seemed far more significant than Monet."<sup>10</sup>

This might seem unexpected, given the pictures that staked out her initial claim to attention. They were most striking, at first acquaintance at least, for their deployment of unmodulated, albeit transparent hues; their very meaning could not be separated from the fact of a particular density of color applied to canvas in a particular way. Yet even the celebrated *Mountains and Sea*, with its delectable, near-Rococo palette of pastels, proves to be as much about drawing, about the characteristic gestures of Frankenthaler's unmistakable "wrist," as it is about the disposition of hues. As has often been pointed out, the picture makes it clear that the young painter used Pollock's work as a springboard—"You could become a de Kooning disciple," she has said, "but you could depart from Pollock"<sup>11</sup>—adapting his method of pouring paint onto an unprimed canvas, spreading the canvas on the studio floor so that it could be approached from all directions. But instead of emulating Pollock's webs, instead of drawing in the air, as he did, to make a shimmering expanse of coiled lines, at once confrontational and insubstantial, Frankenthaler made drawing and painting into a single activity, soaking diluted pigment into the canvas as both line and plane simultaneously. In her pictures of this period, it seems as though her distinctive handwriting had somehow expanded effortlessly into sheets of color, while continuing to exist as line.

Later, in Frankenthaler's works of the 1960s, drawn line more or less disappears, replaced by the crisp edges of large expanses of color. Just as the pools of color themselves are like testimony to paint's ability to flow, graphic evidence that the disembodied pigment permeating the canvas was once liquid and mobile, the edges of those pools are like metaphors for drawing gestures. They not only mark the boundary between paint and not-paint (even though the white of the canvas functions as a color with the same weight as other hues), but they preserve the memory of the wrist that influenced the movement of once-liquid pigment. Explicit drawing reappears in the early 1970s, in part, Frankenthaler says, as a response to the arabesque decorations she saw when she traveled in Morocco in 1970, and it has remained a central element of her work ever since. In her paintings, works on paper, and graphics from the 1980s and '90s, drawing is of paramount importance, no matter

how broad or painterly her approach. Sometimes it takes the form of emphatic gestures; sometimes it is disguised as surface inflection. At times it seems almost autonomous, floating free of surrounding sheets of color, while at others, it reasserts the proportions of the canvas or the thrusts of Frankenthaler's loosely defined abstract images—all of which bears out the accuracy of the artist's assessment of the significance of drawing and gesture in her paintings.

Yet whatever importance Frankenthaler attaches to drawing, in the broadest sense of the word and in all its aspects, there is no doubt that color plays a leading role in both the structural and expressive qualities of her work. Confusion arises because what is usually meant by "color" in discussions of her art is only one kind of color. A "typical" Frankenthaler is assumed to depend on groupings of sumptuous, probably saturated hues; alternatively, if the palette is weighted toward a single color, it is deemed more characteristic if that single hue is rich, resonant, and chromatic. In part because of the sensitivity of her touch, but mainly because of the sheer beauty of her combinations of unnamable colors, Frankenthaler is frequently described as a lyrical painter. Exhibitions have reinforced this perception by concentrating on her most delicate or her lushest compositions, whose conspicuous presence in public (and often private) collections of her work has, in turn, strengthened the belief that these are her most representative pictures. Some of Frankenthaler's early critics interpreted the pale, transparent palette of paintings like *Mountains and Sea* as evidence of "femininity," a reductive notion that, like the emphasis on the painter's lyricism, remains surprisingly persistent; Arthur Danto's review of Frankenthaler's 1989 retrospective, for example, described *Mountains and Sea* as "distantly Cubist but feminized."<sup>12</sup>

That Frankenthaler is one of the major colorists in the history of American painting is incontrovertible. But the contention that she is solely a lyrical painter most adept at spontaneous manipulation of sun-drenched hues is not only inaccurate but underestimates her real achievement. What has been clear from the beginning has been her ability to sound not just one fragile note but to play great crashing chords, to evoke, through her use of color and her touch, not a single mood but a wide range of feelings and emotional pitches. The lyricism is real, but so is a quality of brooding, passionate tension, a "darker" side of Frankenthaler.





Figure 2: *M*, 1977, acrylic on canvas, 6'-6" x 9'-6", private collection

Sometimes this manifests itself in literally dark pictures or in works that explore a subdued, earthy palette that is a legacy of the artist's early grounding in Cubism; sometimes, however, her most literally dark or veiled pictures seem to generate the most heat. Glowing hues assert themselves from behind layers of somber darks, like smoldering coals in banked fires, ready to burst into life again; pale, radiant colors hover above deep-toned masses, like luminous twilight skies above plains already sunk in darkness. At times, as in paintings like *Casanova*, 1988 (fig. 11: cover), Frankenthaler calls up sensations of hidden light by wiping or sponging out passages of paint, literally unveiling the luminous hues beneath. At other times, especially in paintings of the 1970s, sheer density of paint—the antithesis of the transparent staining of her works of the 1950s—seems to block light, creating new kinds of spatial allusions, new ambiguities, new associations. Some of these paintings evoke the sensation of seeing through light, of peering through transparent brilliance into darkness beyond.

In pictures of this type, such as *M*, 1977 (fig. 2), Frankenthaler seems to explore the limits of seeing. She turns her familiar stain painting method inside out, or, at least, she appears to reverse the order in which she constructs her pictures, so that the way in which they are read is also radically altered. Instead of encouraging light to (literally) penetrate color by allowing the white of the canvas to shine through transparent washes, Frankenthaler builds up expanses of overlapping hues, like bottomless lakes of murky color or banks of threatening clouds, and then adds a layer of atmospheric pale color—often a creamy or silvery white—now attenuating it into near non-existence with a gesture of her hand, now piling it into an opaque skin. While the effect of her staining method—soaking thinned-out pigment into the very fabric of the canvas—was to disembody the picture, Frankenthaler's more recent approach seems, quite the opposite, to emphasize the physicality of picture-making by affirming the materiality of the canvas, the fact of paint, and, because of the tactility of that dragged top layer, the presence of the



painter herself. In these paintings, accumulated veils of subtly gradated tones suggest infinite space, while the surface layer of diaphanous white aggressively cancels this association by returning us to the surface of the canvas. In tandem with the intense contrast of dark and light that anchors such paintings, this contradiction suggests the sensation of being dazzled by shafts of light; paradoxically, the longer we look at the picture, the more it yields to the eye, and the more we feel is escaping us.

Confronted by such paintings, we are not surprised to learn that Frankenthaler has been increasingly interested in old master painting over the last two decades. Strictly speaking, this is nothing new, since she has been a passionate frequenter of museums since she was a teenager growing up in New York, and she has long lived with an eclectic, rigorously selected collection that ranges from paintings and sculptures by her contemporaries and friends, to drawings by the modern masters she reveres, to intimate canvases by much older masters. Since the 1950s, she has periodically produced pictures that are free "abstract responses" to old master paintings that have absorbed or, as she says, "puzzled" her; the list of sources ranges from Francisco Goya to Carel Fabritius to Rembrandt to Edouard Manet. But what is noteworthy is that the masters who have engaged Frankenthaler most, in recent years—Rembrandt, Courbet, and Manet, among others—are painters whose strength lies in their expressive inflection of tonality, their orchestration of somber, deep hues, not of brilliant, close-valued chromatic colors. Even Frankenthaler's approach to the work of virtuoso colorists seems to have changed slightly. Speaking recently about Monet, she expressed her regard not, as one might have expected, for his evanescent, reflective lily ponds or his light-struck landscapes but rather for his crepuscular, crusty last paintings—those haunting frontal pictures of the Japanese bridge in his Giverny garden, in which a simplified image all but disappears under the weight of detached strokes and deep, brooding color.

These enthusiasms may seem surprising for the painter of the ephemeral, fragile, pastel *Mountains and Sea*. It is tempting (and not inaccurate) to account for this "darkening" of Frankenthaler's tastes and the related darkening of her palette—in some pictures, at least—by pointing out that more than forty-five years have passed since that wonderful early picture was painted. There are ample precedents in the work of other artists for this kind of shift, from the optimism and

exuberance of youth to the measured wisdom of maturity, but the darker side of Frankenthaler by no means dominates her recent efforts. It has, in any event, been present from the beginning; the paintings that immediately followed *Mountains and Sea*, in fact, were darker, denser, and less watercolor-like, and even after she began to take full advantage of her stain method, after 1956, she continued to explore dark as well as delicate hues.

Frankenthaler's exploration of the implications of somber hues or even non-colors—the "mud from the bottom of the pail"—has not been restricted to painting. From the beginning of her career, she has made full use of her darker palette in her works on paper and prints. Obviously, these media are inherently associated with a tradition of black and white, rather than with chromatic hues, but as in Frankenthaler's canvases, darkness in her paper works and graphics seems to be a coloristic choice made for expressive effect, not simply an acceptance of a material fact.

Frankenthaler's most perceptive critics have always been aware that she is not simply a "lyrical" painter. Frank O'Hara, who wrote intelligently and sympathetically about the young artist's earliest exhibitions, noted the breadth of her reach in his catalogue essay for her first major museum exhibition, at the Jewish Museum, New York, in 1960. O'Hara commented on Frankenthaler's paintings of the 1950s: "She has the ability to let a painting be beautiful, or graceful, or sullen and perfunctory, if these qualities are part of the force and clarity of the occasion. The range of her emotional subject matter is very wide. The erotic overtones can have the sweetness almost of a Watteau or a kind of irony resembling that of early Goya.... I feel that *Winter Hunt*, *Madridscape*, and *Hotel Cro-Magnon* are tragic in tone, without any insistence that the emotion is more major than those contained in other works."<sup>13</sup> Even earlier, in a review of Frankenthaler's 1954 show at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, O'Hara observed that in all of the exhibited paintings there was "a disdain of appearances, and sometimes a private unpleasantness of tenor which is made beautiful by its unimpeded self-assertion—which is to say that then the artist disappears and we have a fact of experience."<sup>14</sup>

Throughout her career, Frankenthaler's emotional range is echoed by variations in both her palette and the material density of her paintings. Sometimes one seems to be a consequence of the other. While she is capable of constructing





Figure 3: *Tangent*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 5'-4 1/2" x 9'-3 1/2", collection of Mr. and Mrs. Alan Mintz

dark, brooding pictures, like nocturnal versions of her sunlit, high-key paintings, with thin expanses of deep, resonant tones, she frequently achieves a kind of damped-down, saturated but subdued palette through sheer accumulation. The darkest hues in that palette are achieved, as well, through sheer accumulation; Frankenthaler mixes her own version of "black" out of browns, saturated blues, deep greens, and even what she calls "deep crimsons and magentas." On her canvases, she forces us to read color through color, layering sweeps of paint that gradually coalesce into rich, unnamable hues, and often, into a surface that, in marked contrast to the weightless stains of her earlier work, seems substantial, and tactile. Obviously, there is no simple equation to be made between specific hues or densities and specific references or emotional temperatures. Darkness does not automatically signal despair or even the absence of light. The obvious example is, of course, Matisse's use of black as a (completely convincing) equivalent for blazing sunlight. "Blue doesn't have to mean sky. Green doesn't have to mean grass," Frankenthaler has said. "A dark picture doesn't have to mean sadness. It can be mysterious *on its own* as painting because of how and where the color is used." Of course, just what constitutes "a dark picture" is open to debate, whether

we are referring to metaphorical darkness of mood or literal somberness of hue. Just as each individual's associations with particular colors will vary, changing the general meaning of a picture, context can similarly affect not only the way hues are perceived but their connotations as well. Despite these variables, however, associations with nature are frequent in Frankenthaler's paintings of the past two decades or so, particularly in her moodier, shaded works, such as *Tangent*, 1988 (fig. 3). Admittedly, this has as much to do with composition and paint handling as with palette. The overscaled gestures with which she applies paint are increasingly parallel to the surface, reasserting flatness, and at the same time, suggesting the big divisions of landscape space: land, sea, sky, distant mountains. As Hilton Kramer, reviewing Frankenthaler's 1977 exhibition at André Emmerich Gallery, observed: "There is much to admire in these new paintings, but certainly the most astonishing are the pictures painted in somber earth tones. [In them] we glimpse the essential 'landscape' that seems always to be at the heart of these paintings."<sup>15</sup>

It is worth noting that Frankenthaler has lived and maintained a studio on the Connecticut shore for the past twenty



years or so; just as the landscapes she saw on a trip made just before she painted the abstract *Mountains and Sea* somehow affected the picture—"the landscape was in my arms," she said—the limitless space and diffused light of the seascape outside her windows seem to have suffused her recent work. Yet many pictures, such as *Franciscan*, 1985 (fig. 6), seem haunted by confrontational personages, fleetingly suggested by nothing more specific than verticality and rapid drawing, while still others, such as *Paris at Night*, 1986 (fig. 7) or *Madrid*, 1984 (fig. 8), are as non-specific but suggestive as a flavor or a scent. Yet, as always, even Frankenthaler's most resonant paintings remain wholly abstract. Nature is evoked, not depicted or interpreted; the hint of the figure remains just that, a hint, an overtone, like an elusive memory. At times, even the most powerful associations seem to be at one remove, as though the picture were a potent metaphor for remembering; lights pulled up out of darkness seem equivalents for dredging recollections out of a sea of sensations.

Frankenthaler's cursive drawing can provide counterpoint and cancel out the landscape associations of long horizontal painting gestures—without, necessarily, provoking thoughts of the figure—while, paradoxically, the material qualities of her medium both intensify allusive references and diminish them by returning us to the fact of paint on canvas. Whether we associate these pictorial phenomena with substantial things like earth, rocks, or deep water, or with ephemera like an infinite expanse of sky, threatening clouds, twilight, or night is bound up with material qualities of paint itself—our responses to opacity or transparency, density or washiness, smoothness or brushiness, and so on—almost as much as it is with color. Transparency can make the darkest color seem luminous, while, conversely, repeated layering can make even a mid-tone hue seem opaque, saturated, mysterious, dark. A color that might seem brilliant and joyful in other contexts becomes slightly ominous, while an unnamable, murky "off" hue seems rich, full of light, because of what is beside it or punctuates it, or simply because of how it is applied. It is rather like the way Pierre Bonnard could make a range of muddy lavenders and dull ochres stand plausibly for pearly skin tones in a light-drenched Provençal interior.

In a sense, Frankenthaler has come full circle in painting with her darker palette. These pictures invite comparison not with the great chromatic colorists who are so frequently invoked as Frankenthaler's ancestors and peers but with a painter who interested her in her formative years because of his drawing and what she calls "the spatial pushing back and pulling forward"<sup>16</sup> in his work—Georges Braque. Yet, paradoxically, it is Braque's color, particularly in his jammed interiors and crowded studios, from the late 1920s on, that brings him to mind in relation to Frankenthaler's dark paintings. Braque was a master of non-colors, able to make us believe that smoggy browns, black-greens, and leaden grays were equivalents not of outdoor darkness but of lamplit salons and sun-drenched studios.

"The lightest palette can be a dead weight," Frankenthaler has observed, "just as a dark painting can burst with light. I look at Rembrandt, Matisse, and Monet's late Giverny bridge scenes that are painted in dark brown tones. They are fantastic in their play on depth, their light."<sup>17</sup>

She could have been describing some of her own most ambitious, most felt paintings of the past two decades, pictures that continue to astonish, as they did the critic writing in the *New York Times* in 1977. Frankenthaler will undoubtedly—and deservedly—continue to be praised for her abilities and her achievements as a colorist. She will continue to seduce us, as she has since the beginning of her career, with unexpected, evocative groupings of unabashedly beautiful hues. But if we pay close attention, she will also remind us, as she has since the beginning of her career, that the beautiful (and the expressive) spans a very broad spectrum. In her hands, "mud from the bottom of the pail" can become the most ravishing, emotionally resonant color we have ever seen.

**Karen Wilkin**

New York, February 1998





Figure 4: *Viewpoint I*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 5'-6" x 7'-9", private collection

## II. Notes

1. Since Frankenthaler has always resisted being co-opted by feminist critics, insisting on being perceived as a "painter" rather than a "woman painter," she has largely succeeded in making aesthetic issues, rather than gender-based ones, central to analysis of her work.
2. Uncited quotations are from Helen Frankenthaler's conversations with the author during the preparation of this exhibition, 1995–97.
3. Karen Wilkin, *Frankenthaler: Works on Paper 1949–1984* (New York: Braziller, 1984), 66.
4. *Ibid.*, 69.
5. Julia Brown and Susan Cross, *After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1956–1959*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Guggenheim Museum and Abrams, 1998), 32.
6. Wilkin, 69.
7. Hilton Kramer, "An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler," *Partisan Review* (Spring 1994): 243.
8. Frankenthaler says she was particularly struck, in Pollock's 1950 exhibition, with *Lavender Mist Number 1*, 1950 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) and *Autumn Rhythm Number 30*, 1950 (Metropolitan Museum of Art), both masterly orchestrations of black, white, and a range of subtle grays—from near-lavender to aluminum—and tans.
9. Brown, 32.
10. Wilkin, 104.
11. *Ibid.*, 36.
12. Arthur C. Danto, "Helen Frankenthaler," *The Nation* (August 21–28, 1989): 219.
13. Frank O'Hara, *Helen Frankenthaler: Paintings*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1960), 7.
14. Frank O'Hara, "Helen Frankenthaler," *Art News* (December 1954): 53.
15. Hilton Kramer, "Art: Special Breed at Folk Art Show," *The New York Times* (December 2, 1977).
16. Brown, 32.
17. *Ibid.*, 40.



### III. Checklist of Works in the Exhibition

Figure 2: *M*, 1977

Acrylic on canvas

6'-6" x 9'-6"

Private collection

Figure 3: *Tangent*, 1988

Acrylic on canvas

5'-4 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 9'-3 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Alan Mintz

Figure 4: *Viewpoint I*, 1974

Acrylic on canvas

5'-6" x 7'-9"

Private collection

Figure 5: *The Way Home*, 1986

Acrylic on canvas

6'-11 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 5'-5 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. David Bakalar

Figure 6: *Franciscan*, 1985

Acrylic on canvas

7'-7" x 4'-4 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

Collection of John Elderfield

Figure 7: *Paris at Night*, 1986

Acrylic on canvas

5'-10 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 8'

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Bradley Wayne

Figure 8: *Madrid*, 1984

Acrylic on canvas

5'-3 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 9'-8 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Private collection

Figure 9: *Requiem*, 1992

Acrylic on canvas

5'-10 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 8'

Private collection

Figure 10: *The Other Side of the Moon*, 1995

Acrylic on paper

5'-10 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 5'-4"

Collection of Stephen DuBrul

Figure 11 (cover): *Casanova*, 1988

Acrylic on canvas

5'-11" x 11'-8 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Collection of Lois and Georges de Menil



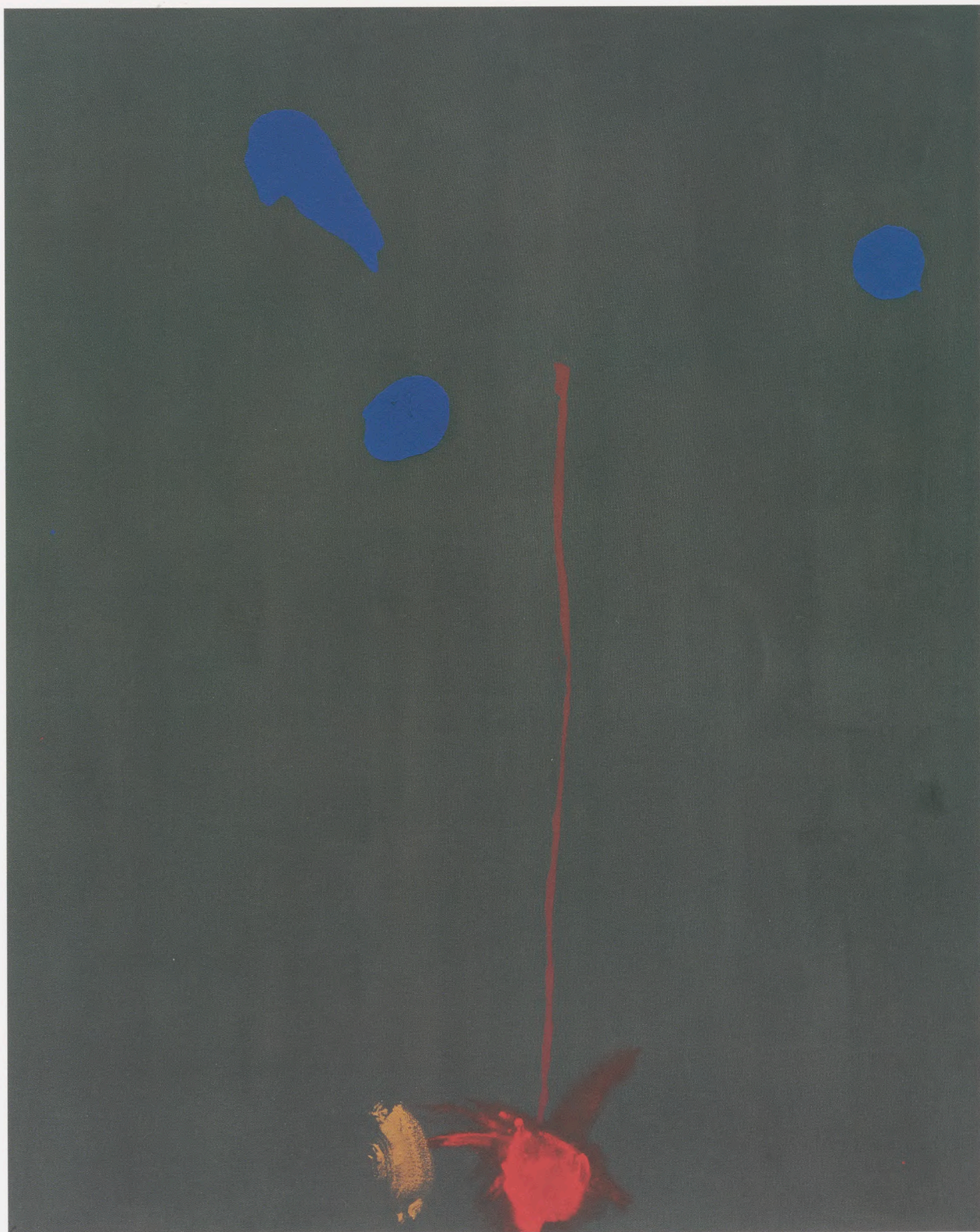


Figure 5: *The Way Home*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 6'-11 $\frac{1}{4}$ "x 5'-5 $\frac{7}{8}$ ", collection of Mr. and Mrs. David Bakalar





Figure 6: *Franciscan*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 7'-7" x 4'-4 1/4", collection of John Elderfield





Figure 7: *Paris at Night*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 7'-2" x 4'-7 1/2", collection of Mr. and Mrs. Bradley Wayne





Figure 8: *Madrid*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 5'-3 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 9'-8 $\frac{1}{2}$ ", private collection









Figure 9; *Requiem*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 5'-10 1/2" x 8', private collection





Figure 10: *The Other Side of the Moon*, 1995, acrylic on paper, 5'-10 $\frac{1}{8}$ "x 5'-4", collection of Stephen DuBrul





Figure 11: *Casanova*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 5'-11" x 11'-8 1/2", collection of Lois and Georges de Menil







#### IV. Selected Biography of the Artist

Helen Frankenthaler was born in New York City in 1928. She attended Dalton School, where she studied art with Rufino Tamayo, with whom she continued to study after graduating. At Bennington College she studied art with Paul Feeley and, during a non-resident term, with Wallace Harrison in New York. In 1949, Frankenthaler received a bachelor of arts degree from Bennington. In 1950, she studied for three weeks with Hans Hofmann in Provincetown.

Frankenthaler has taught and lectured throughout the world and served on the Fulbright Selection Committee and the National Council on the Arts of the National Endowment for the Arts, among other such posts. She has received numerous awards internationally, including the New York City Mayor's Award of Honor for Arts and Culture and the Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement, College Art Association, 1994, and countless honorary degrees.

With her husband, Stephen DuBrul, Helen Frankenthaler lives and works in New York and Connecticut.

##### Major exhibitions include:

- 1951 Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York (First solo exhibition)
- 1957 *Young America 1957*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; *Artists of the New York School: Second Generation*, The Jewish Museum, New York; *Recent American Acquisitions*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1959 *Documenta II*, Kassel; *V Bienal*, São Paulo; Première Biennale de Paris (awarded first prize); First solo exhibition at André Emmerich Gallery, New York
- 1960 *Helen Frankenthaler: Paintings*, The Jewish Museum, New York.
- 1966 Represents United States (along with three other painters) at *XXIII International Biennial Exhibition of Art*, Venice.
- 1969 *Helen Frankenthaler*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and European tour.
- 1975 *Helen Frankenthaler: Paintings 1969—1974*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. and United States tour.

- 1978 *Helen Frankenthaler: A Selection of Small Scale Paintings 1949—1977*, U.S. Information Agency touring exhibition; *Helen Frankenthaler*, Bennington College, Bennington, VT.
- 1980 *Helen Frankenthaler: Works of the Seventies*, Saginaw Art Museum, Saginaw, MI, and Michigan tour; *Helen Frankenthaler: Prints 1961—1979*, Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown, MA, and United States tour.
- 1981 *Depuis la Couleur 1958/1964: Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski*, Centre d'Arts Plastiques Contemporains de Bordeaux, Entrepot Lainé, Bordeaux; *Helen Frankenthaler: The 1950s*, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA.
- 1984 *Frankenthaler: Works on Paper 1949—1984*, International Exhibitions Foundation, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and tour of United States and Canada.
- 1985 Premiere of *Number Three*, to Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3, at the Royal Ballet, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London, with sets and costumes designed by Frankenthaler.
- 1989 *Helen Frankenthaler: A Paintings Retrospective*, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, TX, and United States tour.
- 1992 First solo exhibition at Knoedler & Company, New York.
- 1993 *Helen Frankenthaler: Prints*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and tour of United States and Japan.
- 1998 *After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1956—1959*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and international tour; *Frankenthaler: The Darker Palette*, Savannah College of Art and Design, GA, and United States tour.

For a detailed chronology, exhibition history, and bibliography see John Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989.



## V. Selected Readings

### Monographs and Major Exhibition Catalogues:

*Helen Frankenthaler: Paintings*. Exhibition catalogue with essay by Frank O'Hara. New York: The Jewish Museum, 1960.

*Helen Frankenthaler*. Exhibition catalogue with essay by E.C. Goosen. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969.

Barbara Rose, *Frankenthaler*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972. (2nd ed. 1975; 3rd ed. 1979.)

*Helen Frankenthaler: Paintings 1969–1974*. Exhibition catalogue with introduction by Gene Baro. Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1975.

*Helen Frankenthaler*. Exhibition catalogue with essay by E.C. Goosen. Bennington, Vermont: Bennington College, 1978.

*Helen Frankenthaler: A Selection of Small Scale Paintings 1949–1977*. Exhibition catalogue with essay by Andrew Forge. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Information Agency, 1978.

*Helen Frankenthaler: Works of the Seventies*. Exhibition catalogue with essay by Cynthia Goodman. Saginaw, Michigan: Saginaw Art Museum, 1980.

*Helen Frankenthaler: The 1950s*. Exhibition catalogue with essay by Carl Belz. Waltham, Massachusetts: Rose Art Museum, 1981.

Karen Wilkin, *Frankenthaler: Works on Paper 1949–1984*. New York: George Braziller, 1984. (2nd ed. 1995.)

John Elderfield, *Frankenthaler*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989. (2nd ed. 1990; 3rd ed. 1997.)

*Helen Frankenthaler: A Paintings Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue with essay by E. A. Carmean Jr. New York and Fort Worth, Texas: Harry N. Abrams and Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 1989.

*Helen Frankenthaler: Prints*. Exhibition catalogue with essay by Ruth E. Fine. New York and Washington, D.C.: Harry N. Abrams and National Gallery of Art.

Pegram Harrison and Suzanne Boorsch, *Frankenthaler, A Catalogue Raisonné: Prints 1961–1994*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996.

*After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1956–1959*, exhibition catalogue with essays by Julia Brown and Susan Cross. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1998.

*Frankenthaler: The Darker Palette*, exhibition catalogue with essay by Karen Wilkin. Savannah, Georgia: Savannah College of Art and Design, 1998.

### Cited Articles

Frank O'Hara, "Helen Frankenthaler," *Art News* (December 1954): 53.

Hilton Kramer, "Art: Special Breed at Folk Art Show," *The New York Times* (December 2, 1977).

Arthur C. Danto, "Helen Frankenthaler," *The Nation* (August 21/28, 1989): 217–20.



## Icons of the Century

The Savannah College of Art and Design *Icons of the Century* micromuseum series of contemporary art exhibitions focuses on an elite group of significant, high-profile artists. Each exhibition includes works representing quintessential currents of twentieth-century art, presented in the context of support materials such as biographical and art historical information.

The theme for the exhibitions is based on the icon, used in a multi-leveled sense, that is, as iconic image possessed of an innate significance, as recognizable pictorial symbol, and as the artist's personal exploration of a single theme through one or more depictions. The series began with seven major solo exhibitions showcasing work by Dale Chihuly, James Surls, Laurie Simmons, Jim Dine, Adrian Piper, Romare Bearden, and Bill Viola.

The series continued with *Centurions*, exhibitions of work by artists who have impacted a broad span of the century—those who have helped to define or alter the course of twentieth-century art and have contributed a body of work that has influenced the critics' and historians' concepts of modern style and design. The first of these was an exhibition of the work of Robert Rauschenberg.

The second *Centurions* exhibition, *101 Visions*, photographs from the private collection of Charles Cowles, was a premiere showing of work by 101 major photographers who have defined the genre over the span of the century. The 1996–97 exhibition series concluded with *Jasper Johns: The Seasons*, a timely display of prints representing many of the major images and processes in Johns' oeuvre.

The 1997–98 *Centurions* series opened with *Photorealists*, a collection of twelve paintings by twelve prominent artists, each of whom has contributed to defining the complexity and diversity of this style. The series continued with *Jacob Lawrence*, a selection of works spanning five decades of the artist's epic career.

The Savannah College of Art and Design expresses appreciation to Helen Frankenthaler, for her kind cooperation in making this exhibition possible, and to Karen Wilkin, curator of the exhibition, for her insightful essay. The college also expresses thanks to Ann Freedman and Marella Consolini of Knoedler & Company, New York, for their assistance in initiating the exhibition, and to Maureen St. Onge for organizing the work and facilitating the process. We are grateful to the lenders to the exhibition and to the institutions participating in the exhibition tour, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and the Art Museum, Princeton University.

**Judith Van Baron, Ph.D.**

Vice President for External Affairs



## About the College

The Savannah College of Art and Design exists for the purpose of preparing talented students for careers in the visual arts, design, building arts, and the history of art and architecture. The goal of the college is to nurture and cultivate the unique qualities of each student through an interesting curriculum, in an inspiring environment, under the leadership of involved professors. The college emphasizes individual attention in a positively oriented environment.

The Savannah College of Art and Design is a private, non-profit, tax-exempt institution accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (1866 Southern Lane, Decatur, Georgia 30033-4097; telephone number 404-679-4501) to award bachelor's and master's degrees. The college offers bachelor of fine arts, master of arts and master of fine arts degrees in architectural history, art history, computer art, fashion, fibers, furniture design, graphic design, historic preservation, illustration, industrial design, interior design, metals and jewelry, painting, photography, sequential art and video. The college also offers the bachelor of architecture degree and the master of architecture degree. The five-year bachelor of architecture degree is accredited by the National Architectural Accrediting Board. Minors are offered in architectural history, art history, electronic design, media and performing arts, printmaking and sound design.

Class size is small, allowing each student the opportunity to receive the individual attention essential to the realization of

his or her utmost potential. Faculty members have distinguished backgrounds, professionally and educationally, and are outstanding in their fields. The international faculty and student body have come from each of the fifty states and from more than eighty different countries. A strong English as a Second Language program and dedicated international student services staff is available to assist international students with the adjustment to college life in the United States.

The facilities of the college provide leading edge technology in a historic setting. The college is a leader in restoring architectural treasures in Savannah's renowned National Landmark Historic District, winning recognition from the Historic Savannah Foundation, the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation, the Art Deco Societies of America, the American Institute of Architects, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The campus includes more than 40 restored buildings equipped with state-of-the-art technology.

The Savannah College of Art and Design competes at the NCAA Division III level in soccer, tennis, basketball, baseball, softball, volleyball, rowing and golf, and sponsors a variety of club and intramural teams.

For more information about the college, programs of study, or cultural events the college sponsors, call 1-800-869-7223 or visit the college on the World Wide Web at <http://www.scad.edu>. E-mail may be sent to [info@scad.edu](mailto:info@scad.edu).

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Savannah College of Art and Design wishes to thank the artist; Lois and Georges de Menil; Harry N. Abrams, Inc.; Knoedler & Company, New York; and André Emmerich Gallery, New York for supplying the illustrations.

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Printed in the United States of America. International Standard Book Number: 0-9654682-6-7











